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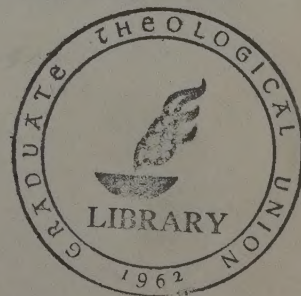
CHRISTIANS RETURN FROM IRAN
WITH PLEA FOR UNDERSTANDING

NEW YORK -- Seven Christian leaders and teachers returned from a Christmas dialogue in Iran convinced that Christians can make a "difference in the way nations and people deal with one another."

The seven -- representing Southern Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal and Roman Catholic backgrounds -- spent ten days in Iran as a result of a Dec. 13 call by Church leaders for a faith-to-faith dialogue over the issues that divide Christians and Moslems and over the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran and 50 Americans by Iranian students. Videotapes of that event were transmitted to Iran and within a week, the Iranian Embassy in Washington had notified the group that permission had been granted for a visit.

That visit lasted from Dec. 23 to Jan. 3, spanning the celebrated Christmas visit of three other American clergy to the hostages and the abortive efforts of UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to negotiate a settlement. The seven were allowed to travel freely, and said they were under no security restrictions until the riots that were triggered by Waldheim's visit. During their stay, they met with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the Revolutionary Council, and the Ayatollahs Shariat-Madari and Montezari as well as other leading Iranian political, religious and social leaders. They also spent at least five hours in dialogue with the students holding the hostages, but were denied access to the hostages.

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CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY
WITH ST. PETER'S CHURCH

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY, which has been a part of the Episcopal Church since its founding in 1846, is a member of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey. The church is located at 217 Second Avenue, New York, New York 10001.

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At a press conference at the Episcopal Church Center here, they shared their impressions of the revolutionary nation and of the results of their visit. While they admitted that they "were not of one mind" over solutions to the immediate political problem, they seemed to agree on two things: that there was evidence to justify the Iranian students' demand for some sort of international examination of the regime of the deposed Shah, and that Christians should take a leading role in pressing for a non-violent, non-retributive resolution that would both free the hostages and allow the grievances to be aired.

The seven were: the Rev. Jimmy Allen, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's radio-television commission; the Rev. Charles A. Cesaretti, Public Issues Officer of the Episcopal Church Center; the Rev. Charles A. Kimball, a Southern Baptist minister and specialist in Islamic studies at the Harvard Divinity School; the Rev. William Kirby, Methodist-Presbyterian chaplain at Princeton University; Dr. Thomas Ricks, professor of history and Iranian specialist at Georgetown University; the Rev. John Walsh, Southern Baptist chaplain at Princeton; and the Rev. C. Dale White, United Methodist Bishop of the New Jersey district.

Their press conference concentrated on personal impressions from their visit and on a plea for Americans to be open to the possibility of past mistakes and to mute their anger toward the Iranian students. They agreed that they were treated warmly and detected no real hostility against American people. The anger, they asserted, is against the American government because of its virtually unconditional support for the Shah during what the Iranians claim was a 26-year reign of terror.

In fact, according to Bishop White, the students look to American Christians as the vehicle for a resolution. "They said to us, 'Express your deep concern for thousands who suffered arbitrary arrest, torture and summary execution at the hands of SAVAK; about the 26-year reign of terror through which Iran has come; about 50,000 men, women and children who died in the streets to free their people from brutal despotism'."

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The bishop continued: "They know that in the face of American anger, President Carter cannot, and the commercial media will not, speak out in this way. They believe Christian people can and must do so. They know the teachings of Jesus Christ about liberty for the oppressed and good news for the poor. They know of the courage of Christian leaders who have shown in the past that they can and do say the right things in the face of public hostility."

In his remarks, Dr. Kirby took the assertion one step further: "The Iranian people have suffered. They have been in great agony and that agony has been caused by the Shah and SAVAK and the American government support of those two. American people should know and will know the truth about Iran. I believe the American government should ask forgiveness of its past sins and repent, which means to turn around and follow a new path which does not interfere in the lives of the Iranian people."

Father Cesaretti expressed the fear that Americans had "not learned the lessons of our own history." He noted that the overthrow and punishment of dictators and even the kidnapping of diplomatic personnel was "not a new phenomenon," and asked that ways be found to seek a new solution rather than the traditional responses to those situations. "What I found, and what I will dedicate myself to is the fact that as Christians working in this world, we can make a difference. We can learn from the past and not repeat the errors of that past. I dedicate myself to finding that new solution: a solution of nonviolence, a solution of nonretribution; a solution of dialogue. I have come back from Iran looking into the hellhole of human history and I return to this country which stands for liberty and justice and I would like to push open that door of liberty and justice for everyone."

Mr. Kimball pointed to a residual antagonism toward Moslems and noted: "It should be made clear from my perspective that the major difficulty rests with the Christians, both theologically and practically. Moslems have a way of seeing themselves historically as a religion that grows out of Judeo-Christian tradition and builds on it. As Christians, we have trouble theologically coming to terms with a post-Resurrection religious tradition that embraces 750 million people. . . ."

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The group members agreed that one of their major roles in this faith dialogue was to be vessels for receiving and helping to transmit the anger of the Iranians in a way that would break the impasse and deepen understanding. "We heard a lot of angry signals," said Dr. Allen, "and then discovered that there was a lot of real reason for that anger." He said that all had read Amnesty International reports of systematic torture under the Shah but reflected: "There is something very different about seeing a little child whose arms have been cut off" in order to torture a parent. He added: "We're dealing with a new phenomenon in what's happening in Iran and we need to be very much aware of that. The holding of hostages is illegal and I want the hostages released. The anger of the American people is real. The anger of the Iranian people is real and we need to find some way to decelerate that anger in order to deal with the issues."

Chaplain Walsh supported this, saying: "I am committed now to the fact that sufficient information does exist on the just complaints of the people of Iran that would call for an international tribunal to investigate these charges and I am convinced that such a tribunal would hasten the day when the hostages are free."

Dr. Ricks pinned hope for a resolution on efforts to "begin to create an enlightened and informed American public which speaks to issues, not out of fanaticism, and that attempts to explain the realities of past and present Iran." He said he hoped the Shah would be returned "to face the jury of the maimed and the tortured because it was of his creation and of our government's support."

The seven have agreed to continue to speak out and try, as Kirby put it, "to inform the American people of the truth as I see it, in love." They hope that these efforts will find a broader base and begin to open up inquiry in the United States while at the same time demonstrating to Iranian leaders a sincere Christian commitment to listen and respond to their situation.

A videotaped program of their reflections is being prepared by the Southern Baptist Convention and will be available for Church groups in the near future.

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